

TJ Swan Bio

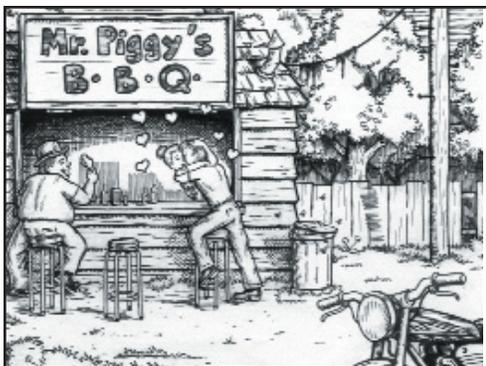
TJ Swan is American music, and to have any true understanding of what this means, and who he is, it is necessary, vital in fact, to speak of his roots. This entails returning to the time before he was even conceived, a time when the whole tradition of American music was being formed in the blood of its people, in secret . . . Earlier in the century, the 20th century that is, TJ's Grandfather was travelling around the country as a circus performer. He was one of the few people whose 'act' was probably as dangerous, or more, than that of the high wire acrobats; he performed in the motordrome. If anyone is unaware of what this entails, imagine a giant wooden barrel painted many colors on the outside, and worn with tire tracks on the inside, in which a motorcyclist, and sometimes two, would circle 'round at terrifying speeds, passing each other within inches, *passing death* within inches. This was an everyday affair, for as anyone knows in this great, wild country, the circus bandies about from town to town without respite, always performing. It is this love for performing that has been in TJ's blood for ages - it is part of his lineage.



One fateful day, the circus arrived in what would have been just another town, and it was for most of the circus troupe - except Grandfather.

Imagine Rightsville Beach, North Carolina. As many of the states in this area, and further south, it is known for its barbeque. Every state has a specialty and North Carolina's is a vinegar base. But there was one place in town quite different . . . *Mr. Piggy's*. It was at this legendary joint that Grandfather met his wife to be. She was the cook at *Mr. Piggy's*, and was held in high regard by everyone around for her unique tomato based barbeque and whole hog, pulled pork.

Piggy's was a notorious gathering place where people from the surrounding cities would come and eventually, even people from the surrounding states, for it was known to be of such exception. It was only inevitable the circus people would find it, and without too much surprise, bbq led to love.



Grandfather left the circus, and sort of settled down in Rightsville with Ms. Piggy. It was here that TJ's parents were born and TJ, whose mother and father were away so often (he won't disclose what they did or if they are still alive), sort of became his

Grandfather's son. As Ms. Piggy was notorious for her pulled pork, Grandfather was to become famous, or to be more precise, infamous, for something all the more enticing - Carolina style, homemade, back-yard bourbon. It was rumored to be some of the most extremely smooth and palatable bourbon ever made, and TJ is still in possession of more than a few of these precious, highly coveted bottles whose corks are covered in a dark, thick, burbly wax.

Even though the circus life had come to an abrupt halt for Grandfather, his unruly behavior and outlaw lifestyle did not. For it is here that the true story of TJ Swan begins, in the dark back roads of the country, and in the juke joints and chicken shacks where shit went down - the real shit that happens late at night which no one witnesses, or even knows about. Unless of course you happen to be part of an inner circle of people who trust you enough to lead you down those unmarked roads. It's one thing to see a musician in a low-down bar, but it's quite another to see him when he leaves, to hear him when he's playing in that back room shack with his friends. TJ's Grandfather was certainly part of this circle, in fact, he was one of the people in the center of it, for if you're making bourbon that damn good, you're gonna be at every underground party in the state!

It was at those closed, private functions that no one knew about where TJ learned everything he knows about music. Grandfather would go on three, four day benders selling his bourbon around town, and take TJ with him. Being a circus performer, Grandfather knew some outrageous and even dangerous people. Many of them were musicians, and some were even famous and it was these folk who used to buy his bourbon and took TJ under their wing.

TJ would often fall asleep under the piano (it seemed the safest place to rest in the midst of all the jiving), hearing in his dreams the rumblings of left-hand boogie woogie in the tradition of Professor Long Hair and Jerry Lee Lewis. This music would seep so far into his bones and blood, that to see him perform today is probably not too different from what it was like in one of those back room parlors.

It was there he met many of the greatest musicians this country has ever known, and some more obscure; people who did not care one bit for fame or fortune, but played music as they breathed. It was just a part of them, an innate part of them, and something they shared with their friends, and TJ. There was a host of blues legends, for Grandfather not only roamed around North Carolina, but many of the southern states; in particular, Mississippi.

While spending those years traveling, TJ really didn't learn things per se but *absorbed* them into his very being - all from watching those old guys, not at clubs, but tearing it up behind the sheds and on the railroad tracks and in the chicken shacks. It is almost as if he inherited these abilities through osmosis (not only does TJ play piano, bass, drums, a host of brass instruments, jug and jaw harp; he plays guitar, left-handed and like a mother fucker, behind his head, with his teeth and upside down). This good time, back room, tear-the-house-down kind of feeling is what TJ brings to his music. It is evident in every track of his first CD, **Redemption**, which if TJ had it, would preferably be a record. It's even set up like a



record, with the first five songs creating a certain feeling, and the next five giving a completely different vibe altogether, only you don't have to get off the couch to switch sides!

TJ spent many a night under a piano, for Grandfather had a truck load of bourbon to sell and as those musicians drank it down like water, TJ drank down every bit of music there was. This was music no one's ever heard, music which was never recorded; made solely live for the audience of friends who were part of something much of the world would never experience. Then certain British musicians began infiltrating the country to absorb what they could of our rich, mysterious heritage and incorporate it into their own records as if it were their own.

Many musicians of the time were obsessed with American music, and they often travelled to the south to hear the real thing after being continually enticed by radio broadcasts. It was rumored some of the more famous rock n' rollers even found out about *Mr. Piggy's*, and spread word of it to everyone else to unearth what not many had known or heard of. Suddenly an entourage followed, and they were privy to a world that even many Americans had known nothing of. One can just imagine many of the famous English musicians of the time infiltrating this arcane world, hanging out at those parties, partaking of the food, and listening to a music so authentic, so warm and full of blood and mystery, and incorporating it in such a way that even Americans began to think of it as their own. Popular music of the sixties and early seventies was so deeply influenced by these American styles, for it was a significant trend at the time which many bands adopted. Think of countless records from those decades, from *Tumbleweed Connection*, *His Band and Street Choir*, nearly every record by The Band, as well as so many others, and in particular, *Exile on Main Street* by The Rolling Stones, who had even on earlier records begun giving their take of this music - think of such cuts as "Dear Doctor" on *Beggar's Banquet*, the first Stones record to have more of an authentic American sound. The list could go on and on and on. Here we have a rather significant group of musicians, English musicians, who have each made records in this vein, giving us their take of this back parlor music; which was previously done solely for tradition, and came out of a mainly southern lineage, much like Grandfather's very special heart warming bourbon.

Hearing groups like Elton John and The Rolling Stones doing their version of this American music had a deep effect on TJ Swan. Yet for all the years he had been playing, he never thought of recording his music and didn't want to. But it was the Rev. Curly Brown, TJ's close friend, and also a very accomplished bassist, who had nearly forced him to bring to the world what it was in deep need of - the real back room music, played by one of its own.

Alas, like a revelation out of the deep, here is the authentic thing like his Grandfather's bourbon, cooked up in some dark shed, bred to perfection and seasoned just like that good ole pulled pork. But here you have our music, American music, taken back from those who initially adopted and presented to us some hybrid form, played by one of the down home boys. For this isn't southern rock, this is American rock n' roll, the music from which many bands of the time forged a significant aspect of their sound and style. Revel in the glory of the real thing, from the source, from a man who has been living and breathing this music since he was a mere child, a man who is the living epitome of this long kept secret.



All the mystique sorely missed in Rock and Roll, from Leon Russell (one of the pioneers of this music and a great inspiration to TJ) to Joe Cocker's *Mad Dogs* is now here with TJ Swan's **Redemption** - the Hammond B3 organ, the lap steel guitar, the mandolin, the sweat, the deep, sultry black harmonies, the blood, the bourbon, the hard bottom, the nasty, low-down slide guitars, all that bad ass shit, all elements of Americana is here, is back and howling strong. The secret sound of the south, of moss trees out in the clearing, of shacks that looked spooked and full of meaning and intrigue, where all the freaks and so-called outsiders (like Grandfather and his circus people) had a home outside the prejudiced terror of society - this private, inclusive world is all here in the music of TJ Swan. It was here that Grandfather would often hold the floor like the great raconteur he was, telling stories about the circus and all the freaks. Now you can be a witness and share in what was once something of legend, something unknown and hidden, something which is finally being shared with all of the world. I had the great fortune to stumble across TJ and his band one lonely night and I tell you, I will never forget it.

TJ and I got to talkin' and for whatever reason, he seemed to trust me, and that's when everything began. When I mentioned King Charles to him, he was quite surprised that anyone still knew who he was, so he asked me to come down for a few shows, hear the band, write somethin' if I want. "It's time to get the lowdown on what's goin' on because people have to finally get wise." After watching him perform at Lakeside Lounge, Arlene's Grocery and the Village Underground, I witnessed a band that was so full of energy and passion, I was shocked. I thought there was no way they could repeat this act night after night with the same intensity and variety but there it was, the living, breathing proof, like the sweat coming off TJ's forehead when he wrangled notes out of his guitar I haven't heard since Mick Taylor and Hendrix.

More and more of the history of TJ came out as I saw him, and I must tell you, some part of me thought it was all a fallacy, but I wanted to believe it and there really was no reason to doubt him except that it almost sounded too remarkable. But everywhere we went TJ knew people and they knew him, and they always mentioned Grandfather and that bourbon. What I thought were myths were reinforced by facts and conviction. Then, I met Rev. Curly Brown, and you know Reverends don't lie, unless they ain't true, but this man, let me tell you, this man was all spirit and all truth and he confirmed things you would never believe. But let me return to the music, to the band, to the way they make you feel . . .

Here you have a group of people, about ten, who when they are onstage, exude pure lightning. There



is something akin to the sound of thunder cracking when they open up with their first song, and it continues through the night. The band begins heating up the crowd and after a few minutes TJ appears as if out of nowhere wearing a beat up top hat (which looks like it probably came from the circus), with long, unruly hair hanging out of it; a wild array of clothes (he's like a cross between Hendrix and Leon Russel); and a hunger like nothing I've ever seen. He sits down at the piano and begins hammering out a few chords right in sync, as if he were there all along, not missing a beat or chord change.

Then the growling begins, and before long he ain't sittin' behind the Wurlitzer, he's standing behind it, rocking back and forth, shakin' the boards loose as if the world's comin' to an end. A guitar is laying on top of the piano and it's like a temptation you realize he can't resist and neither can you, for you want him to play it for you know it's going to be something dangerous. The high, dark passion of the black girls singin' backup start to send shivers up your spine, evoking a spirituality and mysticism that hasn't been heard in rock n' roll for ages, and they incite the crowd to dance and shout. It sure is an unruly, wild, excited crowd and it's elbow to elbow in this damn place! Now realize this is just the opening number . . . and this energy and intensity continues amidst a few surprises.

Throughout the night, things begin changing up, that is, you witness not only musicians who are such high caliber, but they are on many different instruments. The acoustic guitarist switches to mandolin to lead guitar, to bass; the bass player switches to guitar; the lap steel player blows the harp, and TJ plays every damn thing; and they all play these varied instruments with the same level of intensity and ability and talent. Often such precision musicians can be somewhat predictable, for everything is so exact and measured, but not these guys, they are downright ferocious and they play with a fire and exuberance on every number. There is a unity between everyone in the band, and with the audience, for you're made to feel as if you're just in their backyard listening to them have a good time, and it's a damn hell of a good time at that.

We live in an age now where most music has no real content, is manufactured and processed like dried foods, as well as the hokey, egotistical personalities of the performers, who you are not even sure actually play instruments, let alone compose songs. Here is a return to something that never was manufactured, a return to something never even recorded, to the music which is the blood and sweat and desire of a people who want to perform for you, and who love music, who aren't cynical and contemptuous of their crowd. There is a heart, an intention and an attitude in these performers that is so refreshing and invigorating, you are overtaken by it. This is a music that enters your bones, and remains there forever.

Some part of me though still doubted aspects of TJ's story, but much to my surprise, my disbelief was not only without bounds, it shattered.

I ended up at TJ's house which was full of circus memorabilia, about a thousand or so records and instruments everywhere. TJ was so excited from the last several months of playng and recording, he could hardly do something as insignificant as sleep and neither could I, especially while present at such an unusual abode. That's when we began playing records. It was like a history of American music, from the early century to today. From Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong to Hoagy Carmichael and Cole Porter, Blind Boy Fuller, Mississippi Fred McDowell and Burl Ives to Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington and Elliot Carter; it went on all night long, until the dawn. So of course we got hungry and that's when the first surprise came out. It was a bbq TJ had cooked up, and when he returned, not only did he come in with the pulled pork, but a bottle of bbq sauce with the original label, *Mr. Piggy's*. Then, he asked me if I was thirsty and said, "There are only two things you drink with bbq boy, iced tea and bourbon." When he left the room to fetch what he was goin' to fetch, I had no idea he was going to return with what he did, but there it was sitting on the table right in front of me.

A bottle which looked like it was about 50 years old, with a cork sealed in a hard knot of burbly wax. It

was the bourbon, it was Grandfather's bourbon and lord, did we drink.

The next morning, while I was on my way out, TJ (who was sleeping under the piano just as he did as a child) gave me a little souvenir. Now it wasn't what you think or what I had hoped for, but instead of a bottle of that prized bourbon, he handed me a picture of *Mr. Piggy's*. It is no longer standing today, but I have seen it, and I have tasted that coveted sauce and it is alive in TJ's music, and in everyone who ever pulled pork there! More importantly, I have drunk amply of that back parlor bourbon and I will never forget it, just as you will never forget TJ Swan's music when you hear it. It is the real American thing and at last, it is in the hands of one of its true practitioners.

A few days later, TJ got a phone call to his great dismay informing him that his Aunt Irma Mae was on her death bed and it was imperative he go to Florida to see her before she passed away. Shockingly enough, TJ wanted me to make the trip with him - he said it was important for the music, so I could not refuse.

A trucker friend of his, Big Ralph, was hauling a load down from Maine to Florida and we could get a ride from him straight to Gibbstown. Before we reached our destination, TJ told me a few yarns about Gibbstown and what it meant to him and Grandfather. Gibbstown is a place in Florida which many circus



people have retired to and many midgets or 'small people', "little ones" as TJ called them. Because of this, the local post office and many of the other stores were configured to accommodate their size. TJ's aunt had moved to Gibbstown ages ago to be with other circus folk, for after the death of her husband, those were the only people with whom she felt at ease.

Aunt Irma Mae Swan was married to a very famous German magician and she toured with him as part of his act. Many of the other popular magicians of the day went to see him perform and before Houdini died, he sat with Irma Mae and conversed with her, asking voluminous questions about her husband's tricks. Irma Mae was quite notorious herself, in fact, she was one of the greatest clairvoyants of the time. She was known to converse with the dead, did readings by hand and with Tarot cards and tea leaves and she could see people's auras. TJ said Irma's mother knew the day she was born she had it and as soon as she could talk, she was speaking with spirits; she often knew when and how a family member was going to die. When she was older, she began 'performing' and was known as what is called a seer. TJ has this psychic ability to a degree and most of the music TJ writes comes through him psychically. "It's almost as if I don't even compose it", he recounted modestly, "I hear it and I write it down."

When we finally arrive in Gibbstown, we get to a small house surrounded by palm laden trees, moss trees and many cats wandering about as if they're protecting the place.

TJ is real shook up and before we even approach the door, he stops dead in his tracks, overcome with emotion. Finally, we cross the threshold and are greeted by a midget woman. TJ embraces her like a sister, for they truly are family, but I am somewhat taken aback by her: not only is she a rather strange faced midget, but she has another hand coming out of the top of her right hand. I wasn't sure which one

to shake but was saved by her graciousness before my discomfort - she bowed elegantly and waved her hand to the inside of the house, encouraging me to enter.

The smell of frankincense permeated the house, as well as its smoke billowing about, and the walls were covered with circus memorabilia. There were posters that read:

IRMA MAE - CLAIRVOYANT! GREAT SEERESS! FORTUNES TOLD! - in wild, exotic lettering. I counted about ten different circuses in which she performed, as well as posters of circuses TJ's Grandfather was in.

As I was completely transfixed by everything in the room, a beautiful woman approached me with a glass of iced tea. Turning to thank her, I noticed as she walked away a rather large, almost grotesque hump on her back. She was totally deformed since birth, TJ said. She was bent practically in half, folded over as if



she were made of a hard rubber that would not bounce back, but possessed with such a pretty and enchanting face. What curses fate can play . . . I was surrounded by an array of freaks and many of them knew his Grandfather and loved him.

When my discomfort began to wane, I felt more at ease with everyone for they embraced me as if I were one of them. TJ said it was time for him to see Irma and kindly asked me to wait.

As he opened the door to her room, I could not help but to peek in to see what she looked like. Irma Mae was resting on a bed covered in bright maroon fabrics interwoven with tiny mirrors. It was a great contrast to her countenance and almost made her seem more pale, almost yellow. When TJ closed the door behind him, I asked the three handed midget how old Irma Mae was. She told me one hundred and twelve and that many of the women in TJ's family lived to be about that old, some older.

Irma Mae had retired at 86, the midget said, and was very well known in Gibbstown, which she reiterated was a haven for retiring circus folk as well as places in Wisconsin. "This is one of the last strong holds of the bygone era and will probably disappear like all the real circus folk."

"We used to gather here for readings with Irma Mae," the midget told me. "She would talk to all the people around you, your guides and tell you things you might not have known about your own self! She always knew when people were going to die, for death walked like a shadow, always to your left side, Irma said." The midget seemed very forlorn as if she knew losing Irma Mae somehow meant losing a large part of the old circus world. An hour or so later, TJ walked out of the room and despite the deep level of sadness present in his visage, he seemed almost relaxed, as if he had been given a message. In fact, I wasn't too far from the truth. When I pressed TJ about what happened in the room, he recounted to me a few of the statements she uttered. "They're all around us now, TJ," Irma said, meaning the spirits. "Grandfather's here. He's real proud of you and your music. He told me to tell you not to forget all the stories he used to relate to you when you were a boy and don't ever forget your people, don't ever forget the carny folk." With that, she grabbed his hand and said, "I got to go away now, I want you to be good. Don't forget where you come from." I don't know if that was her final word or not but that's all TJ would

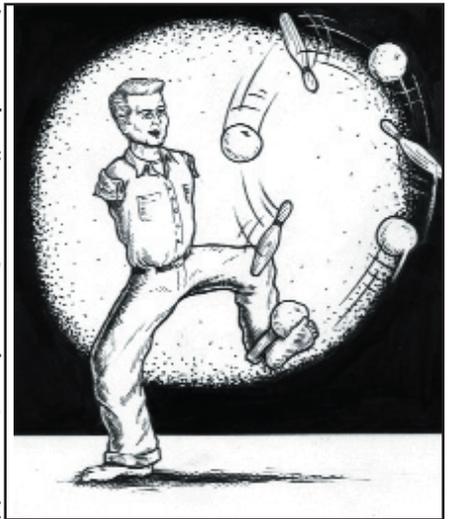
divulge and I felt hard pressed not to ask him anything else.

Months later, TJ called me up, said he wanted me to hear the demo tracks for his new record. When I asked him the name of it, he told me it was about Grandfather and it was called **Tent Show Ditty**. It is an album all about the circus. After leaving Gibbstown, TJ said, all the way home in the truck with Big Ralph, he heard this record; almost channeled it as if it were playing on some phonograph in his soul. He had the basic tracks laid down and would be finishing it in a month or so, but wanted to play me a few of the songs and tell me about the whole concept of the record.

Tent Show Ditty opens up with an introductory greeting as if from a barker inviting you into the circus, and then heads into the first song, "Welcome To The Show." The next track, entitled "Sugar," is about Dick Charmus, a good friend of Grandfather's. Charmus was wrestling a female bear one day, "tried to make love 'to it," Grandfather said, and lost both his arms in the struggle. He became one of the circuses' premiere freak show attractions, known as *Charmus, the Amazing No-Armed Pitcher*! Charmus used to throw fast balls at about an 85 mph clip, with his feet! The song elaborates on his life, telling the story of this diner waitress he was deeply in love with but who never loved him. She would run off with all the truck drivers, while Charmus admired her from afar, realizing he'd never win her heart. "Sugar" is written and sung from Charmus' perspective and tells the heart breaking story of how many circus people feel in 'normal' society.

Each song on the album is based on a story that TJ's Grandfather told him. Going down to see Aunt Irma Mae provoked TJ so much, all of his Grandfather's stories came flooding back to him. It was time he said to make a record in honor of the man who raised him and dedicate it to the circus folk.

TJ is a natural story teller much in the tradition of his raconteur Grandfather, so turning these events into songs was rather simple. The compositions, however, are far from that; they are remarkable, even beyond the conception of the earlier record, **Redemption**. It is almost



shocking to realize the two records have been made by the same man, for there is such a variety and diversity within the records themselves and between them, that you almost disbelieve it. What musician could create such varying musical styles so dynamically, and accomplish it with this degree of excellence?

Another track concerns these motorcycle ladies whom Grandfather said were in love with him. He never knew which one to be with, for each of them had something special he could not refuse. "Grandfather said whenever they came around, he'd get the motorcycle lady blues. In fact, I met a few of these ladies before I left Gibbstown last. I myself got the motorcycle lady blues so bad after being around them, I had to write a song about it."

"Burn it On Down" is another of the tent show ditties. This song is about a broad tosser who used to work the game stands. One day the ringmaster found out he was grifting from the tills and went down to the midway and beat him so bad, the boy swore revenge. Later, about twenty miles down the road, the broad tosser sabotaged the railway tracks and all the circus trains went rushing off the line. Many of the

lions got loose and blood thirsty and some of the equipment trucks were set aflame.

TJ captures all of the elements of this furious story of sabotage and betrayal, and emblazons every note of the song and all the others as if they were written right there before the dreaded and beautiful acts occurred. ***Tent Show Ditty*** takes you through the entire event of the old time circus, Grandfather's circus; from the moment the circus troupe pull into town and set up the rings, through all its wild and fascinating permutations: from the rising of the tents to the howling of the calliope and the barkers enticing you into a strange and enchanting world, unknown and mysterious.

Tent Show Ditty captures and expresses that old Americana so adeptly you'd swear you could smell the cotton candy and the peanuts as you listen to it. There were a few moments where I felt a monkey was about to tap me on the shoulder, begging coins for the organ grinder. So put down a few coins yourself and step inside TJ Swan's ***Tent Show Ditty***, and be ready to experience the circus as you've never lived it before - from the heart of one of its true descendants.

"We have our boy down here, TJ Swan, n' we're real proud a him. I think it's 'bout time truth be heard."

Rev. C. Brown

Written by S. Lee Jones

